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会議概要（会議名，開催地，会期，主催者等）	Globalization, Localization, and Japanese Studies in the Asia-Pacific Region : Past, Present, Future, シンガポール Orchard Parade Hotel, 2004年10月28日-31日
page range	87-100
year	2010-03-25
シリーズ	Singapore Symposium International Symposium in Singapore 2004
図書名(英)	Globalization, Localization, and Japanese Studies in the Asia-Pacific Region
URL	http://doi.org/10.15055/00001307

Eating to Become Japanese: Mealtimes, Culture and Organization in Two Japanese Day-Care Centers*

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Introduction

This chapter represents an analysis of lunch and less-structured afternoon snacks in two Japanese day-care centers and draws upon insights derived from previous studies of the place of food in the social and cultural orders of various groups. As Pottier (1996: 238) observes, "as the most powerful instrument for expressing and shaping interactions between human beings, food is the primary gift and a repository of condensed meanings." Indeed, given the diverse studies that have been published over the past two or so decades, we now fully understand that the production, preparation, and consumption of food carry a variety of moral, social and aesthetic meanings (Douglas 1984: 5). As Murcott (1984: 2) declares, social scientific studies have consistently illuminated how food is closely related during certain critical periods of the life course—infancy, childhood, pregnancy, and old age—to matters like etiquette and deportment, health and nourishment, and social relations and ties. Indeed, Valsiner (1987: 157 emphasis removed) proposes that childhood is especially important in this respect, because "mealtimes are one of the very few recurrent settings in the lives of developing children where they experience the cultural organization of the social life of their culture in its full complexity". These observations suggest the questions which guide my analysis.

First, how are assumptions about the proper development of children related to eating practices? Formulated in this manner however, this question does not progress much beyond many model studies which have centered on food in the family and in the home. The problem thus becomes one of understanding mealtimes in institutions of early childhood education (Cantarero 2001; see also Wu 2004: 128–9). Food practices in these institutions are intriguing because of their 'interstitial' character: they are settings which stand in-between the public, commercialized world of eating out and home-cooking in the household domain of the personal private and intimate. At the same time, such institutions are often represented as standing for the domestic sphere, at least in some measure (Mennell et al. 1992: 112). The 'interstitial' nature of preschools lies moreover in the role they are seen to carry out: they are charged with managing the movement of children from the family into the 'wider' world. It is at this point that the second question which direct my analysis emerges: how is the 'in-betweenness' of preschools related to the conventions governing meals and mealtimes?

Yet the complexity does not end here, because my focus is on a Japanese preschool. During the past decade or so a number of scholars have dealt with specific aspects of food in Japanese preschools. Joy Hendry (1986) for example, mentions mealtimes as part of

her overview of childhood socialization. Peak (1991a) shows how eating is related to the general set of Japanese practices designed to discipline children and to get them to adjust to the routines of preschool. Fujita and Sano (1988) analyze the organization of meals in order to understand the cultural assumptions about childhood development which mark the Japanese context. And Allison (1996) and Holloway (2002) comment on the place of lunch boxes prepared by mothers in the ways families and mothers are controlled by caretakers. These studies—containing a host of insights but no comprehensive examination of food in Japanese preschools—provide the background for the third question guiding my analysis: what are the Japanese cultural assumptions about food that are inculcated in preschools?

Mealtimes at Katsura and Akaimi Day-Care Centers

Between July and September of 1988, and again for a short period in 1994, I carried out fieldwork at Katsura *Hoikuen* (桂保育園 Katsura day-care center) (Ben-Ari 1997). Seventeen years later, I carried out fieldwork in another institution: between September 2005 and February 2006 I studied Akaimi *Hoikuen* 朱い実保育園. While the first center is located in the southwestern part of Kyoto, a city of one and a half million people and Japan's ancient capital, the second one is located in the city's northeastern side. Like most of the city's institutions, both are private preschools, but are recognized and regulated by the city government so that the quality of care they provide is high. Although the centers cater to children from the age of a few months most of Katsura's 110 youngsters and Akaimi's 130 children belong to the older groups of three-, four-, and five-years old children. Teachers at the both institutions are all registered preschool caretakers who have at least two years of specialized education beyond high-school. In addition all cooks are professionals with advanced degrees in nutrition or preschool instruction. The children's parents are mostly middle-class and work as salaried employees in (private and public) organizations and as teachers, or run their own small businesses.

There seems to be a marked similarity in the typical meals provided in preschools throughout Japan, and Katsura and Akaimi *Hoikuen* are no exceptions (Peak 1991a: 90ff; Fujita and Sano 1988: 81–2; Hendry 1986: 136). Food enters the institutional lives of children primarily during lunches and snack times. While the children place their chopsticks, cups and napkins on tables in front of them, the food and the plates are often distributed by teachers and daily rotating monitors. Children are supposed to wait quietly during this period of preparation and once everything is ready they sit down to sing one or two songs. Monitors are then invited to stand up and lead their class in a short grace and in the fixed phrases announcing the beginning of the meal.

The food is served by the teachers and—according to the ability of the age group or of a particular individual—by the monitors. Mealtimes are lively, with the children often talking about such things as television shows, family trips, and new games. While teachers often participate in these conversations, they are also very aware—as was made apparent to me during staff meetings, interviews and conversations when the eating habits of children were discussed—that they are acting as role models for the children. As one teacher at Katsura Day-care Center told me, "meals are also education and culture."

Lunch typically includes potato salad and fish, chicken or beef and vegetables, noodles with meat sauce or small pieces of pork, *miso* 味噌 soup and *tōfu* 豆腐, *tempura* 天ぷら and rice, hamburger and salad, or fried noodles. Afternoon snacks include rice crackers, small (Western) cookies, bean cookies, or fruit. The preferred method of preparation is simmering and as a consequence the food is unlike much of the greasy institutional food found in other countries. Rice is served on most days but bread or pastry are occasionally provided for variety. Indeed, children often close lunch with rice which is consumed either with pickles or with *furikake* ふりかけ(shredded seaweed, fish and seasonings). The end of the meal is again marked by ritual expressions of appreciation which like the pre-meal phrases seem to be used to a greater extent throughout Japan than are terms of grace in Britain (Hendry 1986: 77). Cleaning up is carried out by everyone under the orchestration of monitors and teachers.

At their most obvious, eating practices involve a set of processes which may be termed—to borrow from Norbert Elias (Elias 1978)—a 'civilizing process'. While Elias focused on the manner by which the body was historically rationalized—through table manners, norms of good conduct, and etiquette—I suggest that in Japanese preschools (like such institutions around the world) eating practices are one of the central methods for turning children into 'civilized social beings'. As Peak (1991a: 91) notes, meals are seen by government officials as an integral part of the preschool curriculum and as constituting a valuable lesson in basic daily habits and the customs of group life. Indeed, according to government guidelines—the Ministry of Health and Welfare for day-care centers and the Ministry of Education for kindergartens—acquiring proper eating habits is one educational goal of preschools. This situation is, of course, not unique to Japan. One can find numerous examples of how educational goals can be achieved through children's experience with food in other cultures. My point however, is that some of these goals vary cross-culturally to fit specific notions of proper eating behavior and culinary culture. I will argue that in Japan food is explicitly and implicitly related to inculcating a sense of group belongingness, absorbing notions of responsibility, mastering self-control and self-reliance, and learning the organization and aesthetics of 'typical' meals.

Commensality: Group Life and Individual Responsibility

Food, as a host of scholars have noted, stands at the core of sociality (or its lack): who, when and how one sits with to eat carry certain messages. Thus, the arrangements at Katsura and Akaimi *Hoikuen* betray ideas about group identity and membership. Seating order is the clearest indicator of these notions. Not only do the children sit together in class groups everyday, but on special occasions—say picnics and outings—although there are few explicit directives to do so, the children tend to congregate in the same groupings. In this way both the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the class circle is emphasized. Here, both *Hoikuen* offer a contrast to the American day-care center studied by Tobin and his associates (1989: 134) where—as part of an emphasis on getting children to express their individual wants—youngsters were offered a selection of dishes. At both centers (like other Japanese preschools) children are offered no choice of edibles. In this respect, Peak's (1991a: 93) observations about Japanese preschools hold for both

of my cases: a great deal of care is taken to ensure that each person eats identical food so that "mutuality and common preferences are affirmed." A related notion underlies the pressure—as in other preschools (Peak 1991)—which is exerted on children to participate in the formalities marking the beginnings and ends of meals. A related matter is the companionship created during mealtimes. These occasions were often marked by a lively atmosphere in which the children often talked in animated tones about their favorite topics like television shows, the day's activities, toys or trips they had taken. It seemed to me that in this way the youngsters began to learn to enjoy the relaxed circumstances of meals in which they could share experiences with others of their group.

All of these practices form part of the consistent stress of Japanese preschools to create a strong identity between the child and the class as a whole, to inculcate a sense of group life (Kelly 2001; Peak 1989: 11). But in creating group life the transmission of messages about common identity is not enough. As Rohlen (1989: 26) observes, of equal importance are routines designed to foster sentiments of cooperation and collective responsibility. A number of commentators have noted the central role of rotating monitors in furthering the educational goals of Japanese preschools (Fujita and Sano 1988: 85). These monitors carry out such tasks as leading class greetings, helping to record attendance, and organizing the children for various activities. Katsura and Akaimi *Hoikuen* provide an example of how these monitors carry out assignments related to food and mealtimes.

On a 'technical' level, monitors are responsible for such things as reporting the number of children and teachers to the kitchen, fetching and handing out portions, pouring drinks, leading the class in songs and formalities, and helping to clean up. To be sure these tasks differ according to individual children's abilities, but teachers are insistent that the youngsters make an effort to carry out as many of the assigned duties as possible. To give one example from Katsura, when one girl was too shy to lead the class in the pre-meal grace the teacher did not allow the other children to help her, and the child eventually mumbled the words along with the teacher. Most of the children, however, very readily carry out the role of monitor, and as in the day-care center studied by Fujita and Sano (1988: 82) take great pride in fulfilling this role. In this respect, mealtime assignments are but part of a wider range of tasks by which preschools motivate children to specific actions by inculcating a sense of personal responsibility for group duties. Moreover the fact that everyone undertakes this role reinforces the group emphasis of the preschool. Another means are tiny gardens cultivated in the yards of the centers. The groups of oldest children in both places grow such vegetables as tomatoes, eggplants, pumpkins and cucumbers. Once ripe, the vegetables are taken by the children to the kitchen to be prepared, and the other children told that the ingredients had been grown by that certain circle.

Self-Mastery and External Control

While all of these things are going on, another set of processes operate towards achieving a subtle combination of self-reliance and self-control which are the substance of a disciplined (Japanese) child. Bryan Turner (1992: 4) suggests that one cannot understand the disciplined mind without understanding the disciplined body. Along these lines, I contend that mealtimes predicate a gradual harnessing of the children's bodies

—their limbs, capacities for coordination, and cravings, for instance—towards actions and demeanor considered socially 'proper.' This point seems to bear special import in the context of Japanese preschools because, as Peak (1991a: 91, 94) observes, much of the stress on self-reliance and self-control outside of the home is seen as a corrective to the informal and mother-dependent eating habits to which most children are accustomed.

Around the ages of two or three (Fujita and Sano 1988: 89; Ben-Ari 1987) rather specific definitions of self-control and reliance are introduced. Take the kind of self-control required of the children when they wait for the tables to be prepared, the food to be apportioned, and the group to sit down quietly. The children are usually very hungry and thirsty, and overcoming their cravings is often a difficult task. Indeed, while waiting the children are often told to persevere, to be patient. The point of these exercises is not to reinforce the external authority of the teacher (although this element is also involved) but the way in which the children internalize self-regulation. As Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989: 193) add, "Japanese view learning perseverance as the key to character development... [Thus] pedagogical purpose is less teaching how to dress oneself the in cultivating the ability and willingness to persevere."

Next, take the complex progression from finger feeding to the use of utensils such as chopsticks. From the age of about two and a half children begin using chopsticks. During the initial stages of use, chopsticks are wielded either as an implement similar to a fork in that pieces of food are pierced and brought to the mouth or, as a shovel for pushing food from the serving dish brought up to the mouth. In both cases these methods are still difficult for the children because they must discriminate the right amount of food that is manageable for one intake. Indeed these methods are seen, as the teachers often mentioned during meetings, as the stage between 'eating like a dog' (bringing the head close to plates on the table) and eating properly with chopsticks. Consequently, it is in the use of utensils that the cultural organization of eating becomes most intimately intertwined with the children's developing motor behavior. The children not only learn to control their bodies, but also learn to do this in a manner that is seen by teachers and parents to be quintessentially Japanese.

The etiquette of eating also forms a central focus for combining self-regulation and cultural conventions. I found that in all of the day-care centers that I investigated or visited, that children received healthy doses of instruction on table manners. Youngsters are taught the politeness forms required at the beginning and at the end of meals, the terms used to address persons serving food, or the proper sitting posture. Moreover, teachers use the children's desire for second helpings to reinforce these messages. In Katsura *Hoikuen*, when one three years old boy wanted a second helping of some rice-balls he was made to stand straight without fidgeting, to ask the monitor in a proper manner and to thank her when he had received his additional portion. At Akaimi *Hoikuen*, children we often told to politely ask for second helpings only after all of their classmates were well along the way towards completing their meals. As these examples show, self-mastery is achieved through the active direction, the concerted use of techniques of control used by teachers.

A complementary method of public control and guidance involves the peer group (see Peak 1991a: 132). Peers gather class members for meals, hurry children who are late,

or silence noisy neighbors. Class fellows thus serve to reinforce children's sense that pressure for appropriate behavior comes not only from significant others like teachers but also from their peers. In one preschool she visited, Hendry (1986: 136) observed that no child begins eating before the pre-meal "ritual has been enacted, and children who misbehave are reprimanded by their friends... The more time it takes to complete the preparations, the hungrier they get, so it is to the advantage of all that things run smoothly, which makes for very effective peer group discipline." I was given a fascinating example of the use of the monitor system and the peer group in another Kyoto day-care center that I visited. The head teacher told me of a boy who did not want to eat. The solution they hit upon was to occasionally turn him into the monitor of one of the group of younger children. These younger fellows thus served as agents that subtly pressured him into what she termed "taking responsibility for eating properly." A related technique was also occasionally used in Akaimi *Hoikuen* when teachers assigned older children to 'help' counterparts from younger groups in waking up from the noontime nap and eating their afternoon snacks.

Controlling Mothers

So far my focus has been on interrelationships between children and teachers. But there are other actors that are involved in the organization of meals and in the inculcation of proper eating habits. Fujita (1989) has raised the question of how mothers are socialized through preschool education. Here I take her question and apply it to a number of issues as they bear upon eating and food. Let us begin with the use of eating utensils and eating posture. While taking rather subtle form, teachers often use commentary about children's mastery of chopsticks to discuss the responsibility of mothers. At Katsura *Hoikuen* I sometimes heard teachers complain that mothers tend to entrust the task of teaching children how to use chopsticks to them the teachers. The deputy head of that center (a woman then in her forties) explained that "today, many young mothers do not teach their children even basic things like not putting their elbows on the table when eating". And, she continued, "they themselves eat in this way." During an interview with a young teacher (this was her second year at the center) I asked about the parents' role in children's upbringing:

> Well everything, upbringing in the wide sense of the word: they teach the children how to eat, how to do everyday things. We [teachers] help them to bring up the children.

Along these lines, conversations during pick-up times at the end of the day in both centers very often centered on issues of food. Teachers often advised mothers about such issues as weaning children from breastfeeding, the likes and dislikes of the youngsters, and the best ways to improve their children's eating habits. In this way, they gained the mothers' compliance with their perspective. In a similar vein, the occasional criticisms I heard about mothers' practices of serving their children slapdash TV dinners were related to how they were not fulfilling their motherly role. Hence, as in other industrial societies, worries about the decline of the family are often talked about in terms of the decline of

the family meal (Mennell et al. 1992: 116).

Packed lunches, also figure in the control of mothers by preschools, although this point may be more important in kindergartens where mothers prepare lunches a few times a week than in day-care centers where children arrive with such boxes only once or twice a month (Holloway 2002: 207–8). Peak (1991a: 59) reports that at a kindergarten she studied (mothers there prepare lunch boxes four times a week): the governing expectation was that such meals be attractively prepared, nutritionally balanced and fit the developmental stage of the children (for instance, the rice balls be of a size that can be easily picked up). But there is more here. As Peak (1991a: 60) notes, the preparation of such packed lunches "becomes both a primary symbol of the loving concern appropriate to the mother-child relationship and an important means of socializing Japanese mothers in participating in their child's school activities and demonstrating concern for his psychological well-being while away from home." Indeed, the head of Katsura *Hoikuen* once explained to me that, while the reason for bringing lunch boxes only once a month was that mothers are busy working, they "nevertheless always put up a good show. The children often show me the lunches they have brought from home." Indeed, the children, very proud of their mothers' creations would often display them to me and to their peers. Mothers, in turn, knowing that the lunch they have prepared will be open to public scrutiny, are thus open to what Tobin et al. (1989: 66; also White 2002: 74) term the political pressures to conform.

The Organization and Presentation of Food

Against this background one can appreciate how various mechanisms of socialization are directed at teaching the children about the cultural organization and aesthetics of typical meals. Take for instance the centrality of rice (or more rarely noodles or bread) as the 'definer' of a meal (Cwiertka 2005). A related notion has to do with the Japanese ideas of proper presentation in which each serving is offered in a separate dish. In the case of typical Japanese meals a separate dish—the actual physical container—is used for each portion. Indeed, this kind of notion is echoed in the organization of the packed lunch in which the lunch box is usually divided into different compartments for each portion. I was given an interesting illustration of this point when the three year old children at Katsura were served bread. The monitors were directed to place each piece of bread on a tiny tray and to hand out these containers to the children. In this case, bread was integrated into the cultural logic of mealtime through being placed in a separate dish.

At Akaimi, this logic was expressed in the variety of bowls, plates, trays and dishes that appeared during meals. Moreover, in this center, the kitchen staff placed great importance on the aesthetics of each meal. The head cook thus showed me numerous times how lunch almost always involved at least three colors (such as the carroty color of salmon, the green of spinach and the white of the rice in one meal). Her explanation for this emphasis centered on a combination of turning meals into enjoyable, visually pleasing events and letting the children understand the variety of colors involved in different foods. In addition, once a month the kitchen staff made an extra effort in preparing a meal centered on a special theme: for example, in December the children ate a lunch prepared in boxes ornamented like Santa Claus's sleds and in February rice balls were created to resemble

Sumo wrestlers. In preschools then, children learn the composition and presentation of proper meals.

Given this organization of typical meals, children then go on to learn the proper way of manipulating separate dishes to create the sequential order of the lunch. Accordingly, they learn how Japanese meals partake of a sort of simultaneity in the order by which the food is eaten: all the portions are served concurrently (in separate dishes) and the children learn to eat the portions together: for instance, meat, rice or pickles intersected by spoonfuls of soup or cooked vegetables. This point naturally leads the discussion back to the subject of chopsticks. Many foods are cut into bite-sized pieces before serving so that there is no need for knives and the pieces can be picked up with chopsticks. Sometimes a piece of food is larger than would fit into one bite and the children are taught that they can pick up the whole piece with their chopsticks and hold on to it while eating with the food next to their face. For all of this, it should be made clear that the children do not eat with some kind of refined sensitivity. To be sure, the children are hungry, eat quickly, and slurp and spill while the dishes are invariably made of plastic. But what is learnt during meals is the manner by which dishes are served separately, in proper dishes and manipulated to create a proper order.

But what of the order and contents of meals over a larger span of time? How is the monthly or yearly schedule of menus prepared? Answering these questions leads us to examine how a variety of biological, economic and cultural considerations are brought to bear on notions of the development of children in order to create a 'balanced' menu.

Menus: Nutritional Science, Industrialism and 'Natural Food'

The basic food needs of children are culturally defined in Japan, as in all industrial societies (Charles and Kerr 1988: 108), as biologically determined and natural phenomena. For example, just as men are seen to 'need' different kinds and quantities of food than women, so there are types and amounts of edibles which are appropriate to children. I was given numerous examples of these notions in interviews with the centers' cooks. In these interviews they conceptualized the process of constructing menus in terms of how proper nourishment contributes to sound development. Thus for instance, when I inquired at Katsura about serving fish, they replied that the reasons are their high calcium content —contributing to healthy bones—and their plasticity—strengthening the children's jaw muscles when chewing. At Akaimi the three cooks linked the caloric content and vitamins the foods contained to the special needs of each age-group. These comments however, are more than vague assertions about health and well-being, for they are grounded in a well developed body of knowledge called nutritional science.

Japan is no exception among the industrialized countries in seeing the growth of nutritional science after WWII. Partly related to the development of the welfare state, the outlook of nutritional science is "very practical, setting itself health goals in the first place; as such it can be seen as a specialized part of medical science" (Mennell et al. 1992: 36). From our perspective, what is of import is that experts in nutrition link food to health by setting 'good' standards for edibles. These standards moreover, are deemed to be especially important during crucial periods of the life course such as childhood. In all

government run or government controlled day-care centers in Japan, cooks must obtain a license from the prefectural government before they are allowed to begin working. Licensing involves passing a test based on government run seminars or workshops, and specially prepared textbooks and reading materials which are based on the recognized body of nutritional knowledge. Once working, such women continue to use this knowledge as it appears in a host of cookbooks, tables, charts, and suggested menus. In this way, cooks become the practitioners of nutritional science.

At Katsura *Hoikuen* moreover, some food is provided by a commercial enterprise preparing school lunches. This enterprise, which supplies food to other day-care centers and some small factories in the area, transports its edibles to Katsura in a small van. While the *Hoikuen* prepares things like fried rice, soups and vegetables, the meat and bread are usually provided by the center which also furnishes detailed recipes for various dishes and detailed charts of the caloric and nutritional content of different dishes. At Akaimi while all the food is prepared in the center's kitchen it is done according to guidelines found in a variety of recipe books, volumes devoted to the special needs of children and standards dictated by the city government. In both places an additional constraint is financial: cooks in both *hoikuen* like all such institutions, write a 'school lunch diary' which is open for occasional inspection by government officials and where they record the purchase of all foodstuffs. Menus can thus be used—as part of wider inspections by external government officials—to monitor the manner by which the regulated diet of children is constructed.

These circumstances are related to a wider trend of standardization of food in contemporary Japan (Cwiertka 2005). In contrast to older regional variety, a national version of institutional food reflects the homogenization of menus and meals as propagated through the regulations of government ministries, the reports of the national media, and the procedures of food preparation centers. More concretely, because institutional cooks consult, and are constrained by, such nationally available written material to extend the range of dishes they prepare, children in various parts of the country eat more or less the same kind of food. Thus because recipes have become depersonalized and acquired a more universal nature food has become rather standardized. I was given a fascinating example of this 'delocalization' of food (Mennell et al. 1992: 76) as a reflection of the growth of international food industries and large-scale trade in foodstuffs through the case of Milo—the chocolate drink. Milo, like all industrially produced food products, is manufactured in order to make a profit. When I carried out fieldwork in 1988, the company making Milo was making an effort to promote their product in Kyoto's preschools. I saw a poster advertising the drink in Katsura *Hoikuen*'s entrance room. The deputy head, explained that the teachers' had decided to try the drink and that from its powder they would be able to prepare such things as puddings, jelly, cookies and chocolate drinks. This product was something new in Japan, she added. The incorporation of such products as Milo should not be understood simplistically as some kind of uniform process. The adaptation of Milo for local cookies or the accommodations of curry rice to local tastes are but two examples of the Japanization of international food (Cwiertka 2002). What does seem to have been happening in the past decades is the national homogenization of food.

Against this background we may understand how the monthly menu—a presenter of

meals to come (Goody 1977: 133)—is constructed. While of regular and often repetitive shape the variation of the menu over the long run is made to fit the developmental trajectory of the children. When discussing the menu that was constructed for the infants, one of Katsura's cooks asked me if I had ever heard the term *rinyūshoku* 離乳食:

> It means to wean them [the infants], to separate them from milk and to introduce food which is different from milk. During this period we have to prepare special things for the babies. At the beginning it is a soup, a water thin rice gruel that is an extract from rice. Then we thicken the rice little by little so that at the end they can finally begin to start eating rice. The next stage is a kind of gruel and then soft rice. In this manner we gradually increase the amount of rice we give the children. In the end we give them regular rice. By the time they enter the group of one year old children they can eat rice.

To make the reasoning of this passage clear, while the developmental axis of weaning is found cross-culturally, to become 'truly' Japanese is to be weaned *towards* rice (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). In the same interview, the cook continued on to explain how each month's menu schedule is prepared:

> We check the caloric content, the fat, the proteins, of the food. We are allowed a certain amount of money per day for each child by the government which is different for kids below and above the age of three and this allocation is based on 22 days of providing lunch and afternoon snacks. We set the menu more or less according to the average intake of basic things that the children are supposed to obtain everyday: a minimum of meat, sugar, fish, bananas, fruit.. Again these are different for children below and above the age of three.

She then showed me the many tables and charts describing the vitamins and nutritional content of different edibles. Once the menu is in existence, it can be used towards achieving certain correctional ends. For instance, the menu, or more correctly the notions embodied in it, is used by the teachers to identify a variety of physical and familial problems arising in an economically affluent consumer society. Two of the problems teachers related to the intake of junk food were obesity and mal-developed teeth. Along the lines I outlined before, these difficulties were often related to mothers' responsibility in giving the children such food.

Food is related to yet another level of public discourse in contemporary Japan. Two interrelated sources of health problems identified by the teachers are the Westernization and industrialization of food. Take the words of one the cooks at Katsura:

> There are all sorts of problems with calcium intake recently. This trend is part of the Westernization of the eating habits of Japanese children, so that we get all sorts of problems like cavities and rotting teeth. We wouldn't have these problems if the children ate traditional things like beans or toofu.

She continued on to what she perceived as the problematic nature of 'industrial food' in institutions of early childhood education:

> Some parents want us to prepare everything here at the day-care center by ourselves. They don't want us to receive anything from the food preparation center. They want us to serve more natural food... You know, recently, we find many more allergies because of all of the stuff they put in food these days. Children have become allergic to such things as ice-cream or mayonnaise.

The extent to which this was an ongoing issue in the discourse of the teachers was brought home to me by many of the teachers' statements of which the following is rather typical: "the mothers want everything to be prepared here without any chemicals". At Akaimi Hoikuen the cooks proudly noted how because all the food was prepared in-house, it was much healthier than the one found in many kindergartens and day-care centers throughout the city. In such statements, however, mothers and caretakers tend to conflate small-scale preparation with a lack of chemicals. As Charles and Kerr (1988: 130) observe in regard to home-cooking, the "way food is categorized depends not so much on the end product... but on the process of production that a certain food has undergone, and who has performed work on it." Expending time and effort on the production of a meal in the home thus in some way confers goodness on it. Thus the governing assumption at base of parents and teachers' plea for food prepared at the day-care centers seems to be that such food is closer to home-cooking and therefore better. Perhaps it is the 'interstitial' nature of institutional cooking in preschools—between the commercialized world and the home—which makes it a prime arena for debates about the virtues and vices of different kind of food preparation.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion let me return to the three sets of questions that I have raised in the introduction. As in other cultures, so in Japan it is widely assumed that 'habits,' 'behavior' and 'preferences' related to food which are acquired in childhood shape those of adulthood (Mennell et al. 1992: 58). As I showed, in the Japanese context, this general assumption is joined with more specific notions about what is means to become Japanese to give form to a set of practices found in and around preschool meals. Thus accompanying the more 'basic' assumption about the need for physical sustenance are ideas about proper etiquette, pre- and post-meal formalities, the use of utensils such as chopsticks and dishes, mealtime organization, and the centrality of rice. Moreover, as I contended, the 'civilizing process' of children involves harnessing certain physiological needs and desires, and physical capabilities and potentials towards the inculcation of body postures and movements that are considered 'proper.'

Next, I suggested that there is a need to understand the institutional dimension of food preparation and consumption. In this respect, issues of commensality as a basis of group identity, responsibility and self-control, and the guidance of mothers and families are central to preschools as institutions of early childhood education. In the Japanese

context these points seem to be especially important because preschools offer a contrast to the home and to what is expected of children at home. Moreover, the educational and nutritional expertise of teachers provides systematic bodies of knowledge which are actualized through menus to achieve the educational and social goals of preschools.

Finally I demonstrated how implicated in notions and debates about food and health are wider cultural debates about home-cooking and family life, Westernization and industrialization, and the virtues of 'traditional' Japan. The background of this debate comprises both the standardization and national homogenization of food and the reaction of a variety of groups to these tends. The food prepared and served in Japanese preschools thus forms a focus of complex processes of social and individual control, institutional and cultural constraints, and wider debates about the identity of Japanese food.

* Parts of this chapter are based on material previously published in the framework of my book *Body Projects in Japanese Childcare* (London: Curzon Press,1997).

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